

Sand from Kill Devil Hill, scene of the Wright brothers' success, was flown to Pacific Coast Early Birds on 25th anniversary of the flight.

IN THE soft-cushioned, deep-chaired comfort of the Hangar Room in the Clark Hotel, Los Angeles, one of America's "last man clubs" met recently. There was a little beer—and a lot of earnest conversation.

The average age of the men who met was 50 years or the shady side thereof. By all the laws of men and nature this truly was a last man club because its membership roster of 280 names will never number more. Year by year it dwindles.

The club? The famed Early Birds.

Their symbol is the owl. That's how wise most of them are. For they regard today's young giant of an aviation game with the shrewd eyes of men who have watched it grow from the cradle to its first long pants. Now they had even more to look at.

Down from San Francisco, up from San Diego, west from Arizona they came. They were the Pacific Coast unit of this exclusive fraternity of men who *soled* during the first 13 years after Kitty Hawk. Pre-war vintage airmen. Chaps who used to check their fuel consumption with a dashboard clock that generally was wrong and chart their drift with a piece of string.

As usual, Bud Morriss, Clark Hotel



LAST MAN CLUB

by JAMES BASSETT, Jr.

chieftain and co-founder of the group, played host. Roll call was a solemn ceremony. You don't smile very much when a year's obituary notices are read. For 1939 these were the missing among the Early Bird "last men": Tony Fokker, Capt. Hugh Willoughby, who experimented with many a plane in the early 'teens, and Col. C. DeF. Chandler, first Army pilot to use a machine gun aloft. In 1938 it was Capt. Eddie Musick of Pan-American, Cliff Vandivort, Missouri dirt farmer who flew for

fun in the halcyon days; Alan Hawley, Aero Club president, and Col. Leslie MacDill, pioneer Army airman. So it went—and goes.

In a couple of years, Bud Morriss says, the last-man toast really will mean something. But before 1960 there is work to do. Most informal of all the aeronautical societies, yet the tightest-knit for many a good reason, the EB's plan to leave as their legacy the world's most complete aviation history. After all their membership

The Early Birds long ago closed their rolls. Only pilots in the first 13 years after Kitty Hawk are members of the exclusive organization now collecting memorabilia of pioneer aviation as its bequest.

comprises 99 per cent of the globe's old-time flyers and builders.

In trunks in Manhattan under the care of Major Ernest Jones, former chief of information of the aeronautics division of the Department of Commerce and with the A.E.F. Air Corps in France, lies the nucleus of this collection. Walls like Bud Morriss' in Los Angeles hold hundreds of priceless photographs of people who are dead and deeds that may be forgotten. Upon the Early Birds falls the task of mak-

ing certain that neither will pass into limbo. To recapture for a moment the golden era, let's walk in on Bud. He has a low-ceilinged, air-conditioned office next door to the Hangar Club in his hostelry. To talk about aviation, Bud will send his whole corps of chefs, clerks and minor impediments of hotel management scooting. Such chit-chat is tonic to him.

Skipping lightly over Bud's birth—he was christened Percy G. B. Morriss—at Shakespeare's town, Stratford-on-Avon, 50-odd years ago. He was apprenticed to the British merchant marine when he was 14. By 1909 he was a Marconi wireless operator. That same year in London he bumped into Jules Hartig. Jules owned a Bleriot biplane equipped with a 32-h.p. Anzani motor.

Talk about C.A.A. training programs! Bud's lesson was a five-minute talk on which gadgets did what and why. Then he took off. He had expected to cut a few weed tops and settle back to earth. Instead he yanked back on the "cloche"—a sort of bell on a stick that controlled about everything on the Bleriot—and up he went. For 20 minutes Bud putt-putted along at 55 m. p. h.

Henceforth Bud Morriss' life and aviation intermingled. A year later stationed in Palm Beach, Fla., for Marconi, he got a brilliant notion: Why not transmit messages to and from an airplane? Nobody had done it before. It sounded like a swell idea. And it worked.

Perched on the wing of a Curtiss flown by Jack McCurdy, exhibition flyer for Glenn Curtiss, Bud tapped out signals with a tiny homemade portable. Through earphones he got answers from the ground. Around the biplane was wound the world's first cage or loop antenna, about 100 feet of it. A week later the Army Signal Corps dropped Bud a note asking for information on the test.

Bud peddled suitcase-size wireless sets to



Now a hotel man, Bud Morriss, co-founder of the Early Birds (left), greeted the late Sir Charles Kingsford-Smith, noted flyer.



Tom Benoist (left) and Tony Jannus were EB's who pioneered with seaplanes. They flew this pusher type flying boat in 1914.

Sun Yat Sen's supporters in China for the next few years. In 1911 he went to Tom Benoist in St. Louis. Tom was building planes and flying boats. They would hitch a ship to a tree with a spring scaled between the aircraft and the tree and start the engine. With a hand tachometer placed against the base of the spinning wooden propeller they would test the r.p.m.'s. But that was about the extent of the "scientific" preparations for a hop. Should the nose prove over-heavy, they would shift the engine farther aft. Or vice versa. It was trial-and-error with a vengeance—and all in America's second largest factory (only Curtiss was bigger) shortly before Europe's first World War. With luck Tom Benoist could grind out about two planes a month.

On a bitter cold day in November, 1911, he stood in a fairly smooth field near St. Louis with his best friend Tony Jannus who also flew for Benoist. Solemnly they watched a third man billowing a balloon-parachute, testing its readiness. The stranger was Albert Berry, a daredevil chap who made a precarious living leaping from hot-air balloons at county fairs. Bud had wished to be guinea pig for this experiment: Benoist had said no. Tony took off. At 7,000 feet Berry jumped.

From its galvanized-iron cone which measured three feet from tip to flange the chute streamed out of the craft's belly. It billowed. And heavier-than-air's first successful parachute bail out had been made. It had been tried despite the gloomiest objections of the nation's leading authorities—one even swore that the shock of the diminished weight caused by the jump would cause a plane to turn turtle in mid-air.

Army officers at Jefferson Barracks, Mo., expressed considerable interest in the stunt. You could, they reasoned, drop some sort of demolition or man-killing material with a chute. The tactical advantages were terrific. But nobody thought of the safety factor. Bail out of a plane as a life-saver? Nonsense! It took a war and the invention of the chute-pack to prove the efficacy of that.



EB's (rear, left to right) Maj. E. L. Jones, secretary; Col. DeF. Chandler, Capt. H. B. Wild, Anthony Fokker, Jack Vilas, president; Dr. H. W. Walden, R. H. Depew, Jr., C. F. Dickinson. (Front) I. R. Gates, Marjorie Stinson, Col. Jene DeVillard and Bud Morriss.

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EB's owl insignia is on letterheads of president, 1913 pilot Jack Vilas.

By 1915 Bud felt himself ready to branch out. He formed the Bud Morriss Airplane School which, as far as he has ever learned, was America's first aircraft construction school.

In two years he and his staff trained some 500 men. At one time, Bud recalls, 19 Chinese studied practical aeronautics at the school north of Chicago near the Navy's Great Lakes base. One of them was the famous H. C. Tung, commander of the Chinese air force of the early 1920's.

Then came war for the United States. Bud joined up. He sold his school for \$40,000 to his brother-in-law. He took this payment in tuitions which he promptly gave to the Navy. In this manner almost 100 instructors received their tutoring and in turn taught thousands of Navy gobs. They built planes, too, in Bud's school. In 1917 he stopped building make-shift machines which he had designed for a batch of Nemo and LeRhone motors which he had picked

up and began to turn out some Jennies.

Postwar days were hard times for Bud who no longer had his school. The deflation of the wartime aviation boom sounded the death knell for it anyhow. Bud tried publicity. He ran Eastern Air Express, something that might have been a goldmine if the October, 1929, crash hadn't occurred. He sold his Long Island home and his automobiles and began to repay \$50,000 he owed. He even started a dollar-a-head psycho-analysis business by radio. Hotelkeeping came naturally to Bud. He had been press-agent for many and had "trouble-shot" for others so that when he heard about the Clark's reorganization in Los Angeles seven years ago he jumped at the chance.

The Early Birds were hatched on a drive along Pennsylvania Avenue, Washington, D. C., with Major Jones in 1926.

"Where's Charlie?" asked the major. "Charlie?" Bud frowned. "Haven't seen him since '12. He was barnstorming then. With a Curtiss. Funny, too, because I'd like to see Charlie again."

As former publisher of *Aeronautics*, Major Jones cooperated in the founding of the group. They ransacked newspaper files, wrote hundreds of letters, pestered every old-timer in sight. And in two years they had corralled 120 former pilots, including a few soaring pioneers and balloonists. Nobody who learned flying in the war was tapped. Under EB rules war-timers are not old-timers. Foreign airmen who flew prior to 1914 were eligible. Membership rolls were closed permanently Dec. 17, 1916.

Orville Wright joined. So did Glenn L. Martin, Tony Fokker, Louis Bleriot, Hiram Maxim, Curtiss, Tom Sopwith, Vincent Astor, Gen. Benny Foulois. Women members include Ruth Law, first woman stunt-flyer, Katherine and Marjorie Stinson.

Once a year the national gang reunites. They're a little older each time; a little fewer. Yet nobody drops out of the EB's. If you can't pay your \$5 annual dues, someone else pays for you anonymously.

Their talk is grand stuff. For one thing their conversation is a historical record in itself. Some of them earned \$1,000 for 15 minutes of straight or fancy flying in the 'teens; all of them flew when a man who hedge-hopped from a beanfield in a pusher plane was a hero to be greeted by kisses when he landed.

"We kept it that way," Bud Morriss admits. "It was fun to be lionized. Deliberately most of us promoted the thought that flying was dangerous, daring. We cultivated the hero-role."

"Funny thing, too. Most of the crowd, it seemed, were musicians or some such effete thing. Personally, I earned doughnuts for a while playing the organ in a movie theater!"

What are these "last men" doing today? Bud says the Hangar Club bunch is pretty typical of the entire 280 pioneers. Some have stuck with aviation. Most haven't. Some are rich, most aren't. Some are even on relief. For example:

Hilary Beach, brother of ill-fated Lincoln, runs a hotel at La Jolla, Calif. First civilian student of the Wright brothers, Walt Brookins is a partner with Dave Davis in a company promoting the so-called "perfect wing." Eddie Bellande flies for TWA. One of the wealthiest EB's is Max Fleischman, head of Standard Brands. Larry Brown built Roscoe Turner's famed racing ship. Bob Fowler, first man to span the Canal Zone ("ocean-to-ocean"), has retired. Col. Dick Barnitz manages Los Angeles' municipal airport. And Ruth Law is a happily-married Beverly Hills housewife.

But as a whole the EB's are storing up a treasure house of aeronautics. Sooner or later they will establish a museum, Bud says, for this irreplaceable data—pictures, records, biographies, trophies, planes. For a time the EB's fought valiantly to bring the original Wright brothers' plane back to the United States. Today it's an even more imperative quest for the bomb-proof vaults of Kensington Museum, London, mightn't preserve the world's No. 1 aerial relic.

But until the wording of the present Smithsonian Institute inscription on Prof. Samuel Langley's plane is changed, it is doubtful if Orville Wright would consent to removal of his priceless craft to these shores. Langley's plane is characterized as "the first practical aircraft."

What do the EB's expect in aviation for the coming years? Bud laughs when you ask him that.

"We've all lived through the kid days of the game," he says. "Guesses of the Early Birds are about as varied as the men themselves. But we have this in common: *We've seen it happen.* We do know that aviation will advance at least as far as it did since 1903. If today's planes are Viking sailboats, tomorrow's will be *Queen Marys*!"

All the EB's hope is for one thing: To be the last man on that unbelievable, future day when aeronautics outstrips the wildest dreams of the boldest men. That, they think, would be splendid.

END

EB Tom Benoist recommended Morriss in 1915 as pilot, sales manager, aviation editor. Morriss learned to fly in 1909.

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To Them It May Concern:

For the past 3 years Mr. George W. Morriss has been closely associated with me, i.e. Three years as adviser, then he resigned to become editor of *Aero and Space*, a national publication, which position he gave up, after 6 months, to take the place of sales manager for this company.

There is absolutely nothing I would hesitate saying in Mr. Morriss' favor for proper and diplomatic handling, and it is with keen regret that I am losing his services.

While Mr. Morriss' ability and moral standing need no endorsement from me, I cannot refrain from making up a partial list of his character, integrity, conscientiousness and his sterling qualities generally.

Yours truly,

TOM BENOIST

President